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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces Taylor's concept of authenticity, mean self-concept and identity, to understand the curricular and career choices of female students majoring in English. Observations, a written survey, 21 pilot interviews, and document analysis are used as part of the interpretive case study findings. This paper also introduces Appiah's concept of life "scripts" to illustrate how the pursuit of authenticity may limit choices. It concludes that the considerable value English majors place on the pursuit of authenticity suggests an explanation as to why students pursue their interest in humanities studies (a nonpecuniary good) at a potentially high cost as measured in terms of future earnings potential (and the pecuniary goods those earning can buy). As women disproportionately choose humanities subjects, which emphasize personal and intellectual development, women may also place a disproportionate emphasis on identity development as a goal of college learning and occupational preparation. This study demonstrates the relevance of authenticity as a construct for understanding student perceptions of the factors motivating their curricular and career choices. (Includes 1 table and 27 references.) (JDM)

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Running Head: CAREER C. OICE AND AUTHENTICITY

Understanding Women's Career Choices Using Taylor's Concept of Authenticity

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This article introduces C. Taylor's (1994) concept of authenticity to understand the curricular and career choices of female English majors. The findings are based on an interpretive case study. K.A. Appiah's (1994) concept of life "scripts" is introduced to illustrate how the pursuit of authenticity may limit choices.

Understanding Women's Career Choices

Using Taylor's Concept of Authenticity

The influence of self-concept--the perceptions of one's own behaviors, values, abilities, and interests--on educational and vocational choices has been recognized and elaborated by several researchers. Super (1990) placed an individual's evolving self-concept at the ceater of his theory of vocational choice, and noted that one's self-concept is a personal construct developed in interaction with the economic and social environment. Krumboltz and others (Mitchell & Krumboltz, 1990), building on Bandura's social learning theory, emphasized the influence of learning experiences on the development of "self-observation generalizations" (p. 156) and "task approach skills" (p. 160).

Holland's theory of personality and vocational types is the often cited basis of much empirical research regarding career choice (Smart, 1997). Holland (Holland & Nichols, 1972) also elaborated a "congruence" theory to explain choice of major field of study among college students. He argued that a student will choose a major in which he or she is typical in terms of his or her aptitudes, achievements, and personality. Astin (1993) later provided support for Holland's theory by creating an empirical typology of college students.

In his survey of the major theories of career development, Brown (1990) argued that both Super's developmental theory and Krumboltz's social learning theory do not adequately draw on sociological perspectives to account for the role of ethnicity and gender in determining career choice and outcomes. Brown also called on Super to

develop his theory by incorporating "a core of thoughts about self" (p. 362). He noted, too, that Holland's construct of identity is "poorly defined" (p. 348).

Jones (1997) observed that Erik Erikson's pioneering research about identity development has been the foundation for many models of student development. However, she pointed out also that his work failed to address issues associated with the multiple dimensions of identity created by gender, race and ethnicity, and class. Similarly, Sharf (1997, p. 269) commented that while Erikson's theory of human development, particularly his focus on identity, has influenced many vocational theorists, "the direct application of Erikson's theory to career development issues has been minimal."

Clearly, then, the development of better understandings of the role of self-concept and identity in motivating educational and career choices is an area for further investigation. Such work is of particular value in an increasingly heterogeneous society. The purpose of this article is to introduce the concept of "authenticity," as described by Charles Taylor in Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition (1994), as a means to understanding the curricular and career choices of female college students. "Authenticity," as Taylor applies the term, based on a historical discussion of the modern consciousness, is a particular understanding of the importance of personal and collective identities. The value of the pursuit of authenticity is then brought under scrutiny through the criticisms of Taylor's work by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994).

Theoretical Framework

The use of Taylor's meaning of "authenticity" as a means to understand educational and career choice was suggested by the results of an interpretive case study

of female English majors enrolled at a selective university in the United States. The case study was designed from a human capital perspective (Becker, 1976). I conceived of the curricular choices of college students as investment decisions, which were influenced by a student's perception of the associated costs and benefits of study in different fields. The relative costs of study were understood to be based on students' abilities, interests, aptitudes, values, and learning experiences. Benefits included future earnings and the rewards of intellectual growth and identity development.

Relative to men, women are underrepresented in the physical and applied sciences and overrepresented in arts and letters fields (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). These enrollment patterns also limit the entry of women into quantitatively based technical fields, which are high paying relative to careers in fields such as publishing that require advanced verbal skills (Paglin & Rufolo, 1990). Differential educational investments on the part of men and women contribute to the gender pay gap, which is a matter of social concern (Blau, 1996). The underrepresentation of women in technical fields can be understood as resulting from (a) a lack of advanced mathematical ability (Paglin & Rufolo, 1990); (b) preferences for non-technical occupations (Daymont & Andrisani, 1984; Frank, 1996; Long, 1995); (c) discriminatory environments in technical fields created by a "chilly climate" for women (Pascarella et al., 1997; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996); or (d) as a match between predominant female personality types and the characteristics of study in technical and non-technical fields, as predicted by Holland's typology (Holland & Nichols, 1972). Informed by prior research in these areas, I sought to develop an understanding of women's curricular and career choices based on the experiences and views of the women in the study sample.

The analysis of the case study data highlighted the value that the women in the sample placed, in explaining their educational and career goals, on intellectual growth and the development of their sense of self. For this reason, the theoretical framework of the study was broadened to apply Taylor's (1994) discussion of the importance of identity in modern society. Written by a philosopher and political scientist, Taylor's work informs a political and cultural debate about multiculturalism and the rights of minority groups. His historical account of the concept of identity demonstrates the particular meaning this construct has assumed in our time. "We might speak of an *individualized* identity, one that is particular to me, and that I discover in myself," Taylor wrote (p. 28, italics in original). "This notion arises along with an ideal, that of being true to myself and my own particular way of being." Drawing on the writings of Lionel Trilling (1971), Taylor described this as the ideal of "authenticity." He argued that the ideal of authenticity is central to the modern consciousness. For this reason, he observed, human beings today give special value to living their lives in a manner that is true to what they perceive as their "inner nature" (p. 30). Taylor also stressed that identity is formed dialogically, as one interacts with significant others and with aspects of society that affirm or challenge one's sense of self.

Methods and Data

The research was conducted as an interpretive case study (Stake, 1995) in the Spring 1995 semester at a selective research university. Whitt (1991) provided a valuable overview of the important contributions qualitative researchers can make to the study of college student development. She observed (p. 409), "Qualitative methods are considered to be superior to other research methods for achieving in-depth understanding of complex

organizations, such as colleges and universities, and complex processes, such as student learning or change."

Theory-based sampling decisions (Patton, 1990) determined the focus on female English majors. I chose a liberal arts field with a large number of female students and assumed that English majors are not career oriented. This assumption is supported by the typologies of Holland (Holland & Nichols, 1972) and Astin (1993), in which English majors are considered "artistic" types. Maximum sample variation was obtained through purposeful sampling that included fifteen women of different ethnic backgrounds, career aspirations, and academic backgrounds, including those who had and had not studied quantitative subjects in college. The interview guide was twice revised to reflect emerging hypotheses and to seek both positive and negative evidence related to the findings. I evaluated the initial and emerging hypotheses of the study subject to relevant data categories until the findings were as inclusive of the data as possible.

Observations, a written survey, 21 pilot interviews, and document analysis were also part of the case study activities. Credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was established through peer debriefing, member checks, and triangulation. The interview data were triangulated using results of the written survey, which was distributed to all female English majors at the case study institution. (The survey response rate was 32%, which was 43 of 134 surveys mailed.) The survey development process provided evidence that the inquiry framework was appropriate and that the findings were based on questions with clear meanings. The results and analysis of the survey are reported in my dissertation (Dowd, 1998) and are available on request.

Findings

The findings describe the factors that influenced the curricular choices of the women participating in the study. Students' curricular choices, in turn, limit or provide access to certain types of career opportunities, depending on the type of human capital a college graduate has acquired. Career plans and earnings expectations did not motivate the curricular choices of the majority of students in the sample. When the students I interviewed discussed the purpose or benefit of studying the liberal arts, they talked about the value of learning to think critically and to analyze texts, of learning how to communicate their thoughts verbally and in writing, and of gaining an understanding of human nature and their own place in the world and in history. As I will illustrate below, students understood their choice of major in terms of their intellectual and personal development. The concept of authenticity provides a valuable construct for understanding the purposes of these students. Students sought to discover and be true to their inner nature by utilizing their talents, avoiding rote learning, and rejecting careers that subjugate the self to an organization.

Discovering Self and Identity

For the majority of students in the sample, whether they expected to earn a high or low salary in the future, or whether they were concerned about earnings or not, those expectations and concerns had not played a primary role in determining their choice of English as a major. Table 1, Section 1, summarizes student understandings about the influence of concerns about earnings on their curricular choices.

[insert Table 1]

All of the students in the sample described the subject of English classes—reading literature, analyzing themes, and writing critiques of the texts they read—as activities they enjoyed or valued. All but two of them, as indicated in Table 1, Section 2, expressed their purpose for choosing an English major in terms of one or more of the following goals: developing critical thinking (twelve); fostering their own personal growth (nine); and developing an understanding of human nature (six). Students viewed the pursuit of these purposes as an opportunity to understand themselves and the world better and to be true to their talents and abilities. They perceived that the pursuit of vocational fields of study would lead to higher paying jobs, but rejected that opportunity in favor of a focus on the self and identity development.

The words of Kelly, Tian, and Kadijah provide the strongest basis for interpreting student emphasis on self- and intellectual development as the pursuit of authenticity. Kelly described her choice of the English major as resulting from a long search for a field where she felt she belonged. In making her choice, she returned to a subject that had always been a source of pride for her. She commented that "even in middle school" she had received "praise" that she was "great at writing." Such praise had "been a constant," and constants "should be at the center of your life," she emphasized. Similarly, Tian described English as a field where she could "develop and excel." She felt she would be able to "contribute to the humanities world," and expressed this idea in terms of her personal and spiritual goals to develop a "pathway." She relied on her "passion" for humanities subjects to provide her with direction.

Kadijah described her choice of English as a "natural thing to do," based on her "natural interest in reading." Just as Tian described the importance of finding a

"pathway" and Kelly felt that "[constants] should be at the center" of one's life, Kadijah believed "you have something in you that you just know that you're going to do." I asked how she was able to identify that "something," and Kadijah stressed her strong sense of purpose, as indicated in the following excerpt.

> Kadijah : There is a general pattern to where [your] life is going. It's some things that just keep cropping up or certain opportunities [that are] always open to you. Then you kind of have a sense of where you're heading....For me, with English and with writing and with anything, it just happened that a lot of times I didn't choose per se. It came to me and I figured okay, I'm sort of building something, I'm not quite sure what I'm building towards, what it's going to look like, but it seems to be working for me.

Kadijah viewed her choice as influenced by her sense of her abilities, her promise, or even, to an extent, her destiny. Kadijah sensed that in becoming an English major she was making a choice that would enable her to realize her potential and to pursue her sense of promise. The other students in the sample did not discuss their choice of the English major explicitly in terms of pursuing their promise or pathway. However, the value students placed on simply pursuing a field one enjoys and in which one excels, to the exclusion of developing career-oriented human capital, can be understood in Kelly, Tian, and Kadijah's terms, as a decision to be true to one's innate strengths and sources of satisfaction.

Students would often include "doing well" academically as one of the reasons for choosing English and joined this factor closely with their interest in the subject. In describing their reasons for choosing the English major, seven students (see Table 1,

Section 3) emphasized the fact that they believed they were "good" in subjects requiring verbal skills and that they had received positive feedback and encouragement about their abilities in those subjects. They described their choice of the English major as resulting from a strong concept of themselves as verbally rather than quantitatively oriented individuals. As people who "work with words," to use Alison's phrase, the students in this group believed they would thrive most fully in college and beyond college by relying on their verbal skills.

Valuing Connected Learning

Twelve of the fifteen students in the sample (see Table 1, Section 4) also highlighted the importance to them of participating in classes that allowed them to actively make connections between ideas and to express their opinions. These values emphasize the importance of developing a sense of self through interaction with others and with cultural artifacts (in this case, literary texts). They are consistent with my conclusion that the curricular choices of the students in the sample can be understood in terms of the pursuit of authenticity. Students discussed the high value they placed on being able to make connections and to draw on their analytical skills in doing their course work. Of particular importance was the opportunity to synthesize ideas. For example, Kadijah felt that making connections and seeing "the whole picture" was the essence of liberal learning and the key to her own cognitive processes. Cynthia commented that it was very important for her to be able to participate in class discussions. When she could "work out" her own ideas, she could be "much more successful," because she "tended to remember things spatially." Jane initially majored in physics, but found she did not enjoy her classes, because "I didn't really feel like I was learning to think better. I was just

learning to use these rules in very specific parameters." In contrast, she valued the study of literature as a chance to develop an understanding of herself. In fact, Jane described English as the "study of me."

Six of seven students interviewed who had initially pursued majors in quantitatively based fields highlighted negative experiences in those disciplines as a primary influence on their choice of English as a major. They perceived science and mathematics classes as overly competitive and as focused on the transmission of facts rather than concepts. For example, Helena recalled one particular ecology class as "awful" and "boring"; it was very "specific" and did not offer any "big themes." Helena felt, in contrast, that in English classes a student has a "sense of voice" and "your thoughts matter." The "strength" of the study of literature is that the characters and issues are a "continuum" of one's own concerns and thoughts, she said. She observed that she learned better when she talked and wrote about "knowledge" and emphasized that English classes are concerned with "incredibly complex" questions. In contrast, fields such as physics, she said, were concerned with "simple" equations that were either right or wrong.

Curricular Choices and Career Plans

Ten of the fifteen women in the sample (see Table 1, Section 5) discussed their attitudes towards their future earnings and the influence those attitudes had on their career plans. Each of these ten perceived a negative relationship between earnings and career interest, though, as indicated in the table, their willingness to take a low paying job varied. They believed that relatively high paying careers exact a compromise of one's personal interests or intellectual freedom. Personal fulfillment was an important goal for

these women as they considered potential career paths. Students valued what they considered interesting and socially responsible careers and were unwilling to sacrifice career interest for high pay.

The following observations from the interviews with Ellen, Alison, and Tian illustrate the negative relationship students interviewed perceived between earnings and career interest. For example, while Ellen was worried about making money after graduation, she said, "I could never major in something that I absolutely hated to do, because I know that some of my friends who are engineers absolutely hate it, and yet they're still doing it because they know they're going to make a lot of money, and that scares me. It would be just awful to spend the rest of your life doing something you absolutely hate." Similarly, describing stories she had heard about well paid, but overworked lawyers, Alison commented "what's money if you're not happy." Tian described wealthy lawyers whom she had met "at the top" of a law firm as "disappointed and hollow."

The following excerpts from the interview with Jane illustrates the manner in which students related their learning experiences with their future vocational life. Jane observed that the competitiveness of science classes "made friendships in a classroom impossible. I didn't like or get to know any of the people I went to class with, and I spent so much time with them for these particular classes that the thought of going into a field where I might be in the same kind of environment just horrified me. I couldn't imagine going into a career that was within the same place." Jane then identified journalism as her vocation, making the choice as a way of "taking social responsibility of [her] own particular talents." She realized she would earn less as a journalist than as a physicist

employed in industry. However, she was willing to make this tradeoff because she valued what she perceived as the "intellectual freedom" that journalists enjoyed.

Jane's experiences in science classes clearly informed her understanding of the research scientist's work environment. However, she did not draw on any actual work experiences to inform her impression. The same can be said of the majority of students in the sample who wished to enter occupations in the field of publishing after graduation, a group which included eleven students (see Table 1, Section 6). With one exception, the students with an interest in publishing expressed a high degree of uncertainty regarding the steps they would take to obtain a job or specifically what kind of job they would like to have. Leslie was the only student to have significant employment experiences in publishing fields. Given that students were generally uncertain about specific occupations, I believe they were also uninformed about the specific nature and demands of positions in the field of publishing. I believe they assumed, drawing on their experiences as students, that the focus of such jobs is not on routine practices, but on analyzing texts and making connections between ideas.

Discussion

The pursuit of authenticity is a powerful ideal, but it is not always a positive one in relation to a student's career aspirations. Kwame Anthony Appiah (1994) argued, in a critique of Taylor's (1994) work, that precisely because identity is dialogically formed, the notion of a "real self" (p. 20) buried inside each individual is incorrect. He wrote (p. 19):

> The rhetoric of authenticity...is wrong, however, not only because it is in dialogue with other people's understandings of who I am that I develop a conception of my

> own identity (Taylor's point) but also because my identity is crucially constituted through concepts (and practices) made available to me by religion, society, school and state, and mediated to varying degrees by the family.

For this reason, Appiah concluded (p. 21), "we do make choices, but we don't determine the options among which we choose." Appiah argued, in particular, against the adoption of the notion of authentic collective identities, for African Americans or for gays and lesbians, for example. Such collective identities become associated with "notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves" and provide what Appiah calls "scripts," which are "narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories" (p. 24).

This study suggests that some women who choose English as a major may do so in accord with a script appropriate for the collective identity of "verbal" persons. This script may indicate that a person who is good with words is not good with numbers. A person who is good with words is an "artistic" type (Holland & Nichols, 1972) who does not pursue wealth or power. Such a person does not major in technical fields, take courses in applied subjects, or enter technical or business occupations after graduation. Further, she is likely to be unhappy in such a field if she did. When a woman accepts such "tight" scripting, to use another of Appiah's phrases, she may view verbal and quantitative skills as a dichotomy and choose to avoid subjects that would prepare her for relatively high paying occupations. Finally, when she discovers aspects of the script in her own life she interprets them as signs of her authentic inner nature. By adopting the script of the verbal person, she may limit her career choices in significant ways, though

the signs she interprets as part of her authentic self may be, as Appiah has pointed out, determined in part by the organization of schools and by social norms.

Conclusion

The considerable value the English majors in this study placed on the pursuit of authenticity suggests an explanation as to why students pursued their interest in humanities subjects (a nonpecuniary good) at a potentially high cost, as measured in terms of future earnings potential (and the pecuniary goods those earnings can buy). Numerous studies have shown that college graduates who majored in quantitatively based fields receive an earnings premium relative to peers who major in humanities and other liberal arts fields (see, for example, Eide, 1994; James & Alsalam, 1993). From a human capital perspective, then, we must recognize that identity development is viewed by some students as a significant return on the educational investment, of equal or greater value than financial returns. As women disproportionately choose humanities subjects, which emphasize personal and intellectual development, women may well also place a disproportionate emphasis on identity development as a goal of college learning and occupational preparation.

The concept of the pursuit of authenticity as a goal of collegiate study bears a resemblance to other constructs of curricular and career choice presented in previous research, most notably Holland's (Holland & Nichols, 1972) congruence theory. Other researchers may in the future usefully discern ways to operationalize the authenticity construct by applying psychometric research approaches. Similar analyses involving male and female students in other fields of study would be valuable, as would a focus on African American, Latino, or American Indian students. This study has demonstrated the

relevance of authenticity as a construct for understanding student perceptions of the factors motivating their curricular and career choices.

Table 1 Data Categorizations Relevant to the Findings[1]

	#	Cases
1. Potential earnings influenced curricular choices		
yes	1	Cynthia
somewhat	2	Kathy, Leslie
no	9	Alison, Ellen, Helena, Jane, Kadijah, Kelly, Kim, Susan, Tian,
unknown	3	Lily, Linda, Lisa
2. Goal of college study		
• Critical thinking	12	Alison, Cynthia, Helena, Jane, Kadijah, Kim, Leslie, Lily, Linda, Lisa, Susan, Tian
• Personal growth	9	Cynthia, Helena, Jane, Kadijah, Kelly Lily, Lisa, Susan, Tian
• Understanding of human nature	6	Helena, Jane, Kelly, Lily, Lisa, Susan
• None of these	2	Ellen, Kathy
3. Self-concept as a "verbal" person		
yes	7	Alison, Cynthia, Ellen, Kadijah, Kelly, Kim, Tian
no	7	Helena, Jane, Kathy, Leslie, Lily, Lisa, Susan
unknown	1	Linda
4. Valued connected learning		
yes	12	Alison, Cynthia, Helena, Jane, Kadijah, Kathy, Kelly, Kim, Leslie, Lily, Susan, Tian
unknown	3	Ellen, Linda, Lisa

Table 1 Continued

5. Influence of potential earnings on career plans		
• Accepted sacrifice of high pay for career interest	6	Alison, Ellen, Jane, Kadijah, Kelly, Tian
• Undecided regarding pay/interest trade-off	2	Kathy, Leslie
• Expected high pay, but will accept lower pay for greater career interest	2	Cynthia, Susan
• No influence	2	Helena, Kim
• Unknown	3	Lily, Linda, Lisa
6. Interested in publishing careers		
yes	11	Alison, Ellen, Helena, Jane, Kadijah, Kathy, Kim, Leslie, Lily, Lisa, Tian
no	4	Cynthia, Kelly, Linda, Susan

[1]All names are pseudonyms.

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